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512 to visit a girl with whom he has made an appointment, to return home before dawn; but most people sleep heavily after the day's work.

527 [461] Nine days out of ten this represents the normal Lepcha life, for the Lepchas are extremely hard-working and industrious; though they do not work fast they work steadily and for very long hours. But the monotony of working life is continually broken up by feasts and ceremonies; there are the regular bi-monthly monastery feasts, and in most months there are one or more calendrical lamaist festivals; people are born, or marry, or die, or fall ill, and these are all occasions for feasts for the friends and neighbours of the [574] people affected. There is also a continual current of visits; married women return to their native village, taking with them their children or some relative of their husband's; young men go to visit their *asik*'d bride, accompanied by a friend or relation to help carry the gift; trading partners come on a visit or are visited. All these visits are also occasions for feasts, not so elaborate as the big ceremonial feasts, but a pleasant interruption of everyday routine. The occurrence of feasts varies somewhat with the calendar; they are most frequent in the autumn after the harvests have been gathered and the cardamum sold, and least common in the early summer before the harvest is ripe, when supplies may be running short.

The most regular of all are the bi-monthly monastery feasts, and since, owing to the fact that I was living in the monastery, I was inevitably in the centre of them, it is these gatherings which represent for me the typical Lepcha crowd. At an ordinary feast about eighty or ninety people will be present; occasionally the feast-givers are poor or unpopular and then there are only thirty or forty; and once, when Tafoor was responsible for a bumper feast, there were well over a hundred. About a dozen lamas are seated in the prayer room; six or seven nuns and a considerable number of other women and old men and young children are crowded together on the floor of the small prayer-drum room, the *lha-gong*. Inside the porch, on the right-hand side, is seated the Mandal; next to him is probably Gongyop, as these two are great friends, and the givers of the feast if they are laymen, and strangers and visitors to the village. Outside are probably two cooking places; one to the front of the [262] monastery is fairly small and on it is probably cooking the vegetable 'curry' (*bi*) which is served as a relish to the staple cereal. On the east side there are probably two or three big pots cooking, one

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MONASTERY FEAST

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●527 with boiling water for *chi* or tea, one with cereal and one with meat, if there is meat. Overlooking these pots to the east of the monastery will be old Dunbi, who has got a sort of honorary post as monastery cook; he does not do very much and the position is more or less of a sinecure invented to give this lazy and incompetent man a feeling of importance and to provide food, which will be given as payment for his services, for his wife and children. Usually the wives of the givers of the feast supervise the cooking, giving out the materials and so on; but everybody lends a hand as he feels disposed. Sitting about on the grass and stones outside are a number of the younger men and women and elder boys; they chat and joke and pass indecent remarks and occasionally lend a hand at fetching firewood or water, or bamboos to be cut up into *patyoot*. The younger boys from about the age of eight to fourteen hang about with these elders when they are not doing chores for their parents or the feast-givers; they mostly sit fairly quietly, but occasionally they go on to the hill outside the monastery precincts and run about playing catch with flowers of daphne or chasing the hens or imitating bird calls. They are used as messengers a great deal if the parents have left anything behind; they are in the feast but are on the fringe of it. The girls are more inclined to tag along with their parents, or with an elder sister; many of them are carrying younger siblings, though they often hand over these burdens to their brothers. Almost all the time everybody is eating and drinking.

The lamas and possibly the feast-givers arrive the evening before; the lamas to make the decorations for the altar and the feast-givers to stack the provisions in the porch. Most of the night and almost continuously from dawn the lamas have been reading their books and playing their musical instruments; from the moment they arrive they start drinking *chi* and eating and the *patyoot* in front of them are continually filled. The crowd starts arriving in driblets at about eight o'clock, each person bringing some contribution to the feast; some people arrive later and the full concourse will not be present till nearly midday. Some of the more pious people on their arrival circumambulate the monastery three times, always keeping the wall on the right, and turn the prayer wheels; they may go into the monastery room and prostrate themselves three times before the images. As soon as they are settled each person is provided with a *patyoot* of *chi* which they take and sit down and drink; a small *patyoot* with several 'straws' in it will be provided for the toddlers of three or four, and set firmly on

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its base into the ground some way away from the grown-ups. It is quite a common sight to see little children who can hardly walk solemnly drinking their *chi* sitting in a circle round the communal cup. These babies quite often get rather drunk and flushed and hiccupy and unsteady on their legs and loud spoken; but this is usually followed very quickly by sleep and after a couple of hours they seem to wake up no whit the worse for their experience.

From about midday food is being served almost continuously; there seems practically no limit to what a Lepcha can eat and drink on a feast day. This is a typical menu of the food consumed per head between say, 11 o'clock in the morning and 9 o'clock at night at a good feast: 3 lbs. of rice served in two helpings; 3 *patyoot* of *chi* which were constantly replenished, and 3 cups of strained *chi* which is very much stronger and resembles a mild spirit; 2 double fistfuls of popped corn; about 2 lbs. of meat, one to eat and one raw piece to take home;[2] four helpings of tea; plenty of curry and vegetables with the rice and as much soup made from vegetables and stock as people cared to consume. For this feast every guest brought some contribution, but if the hosts had had to buy all the materials they provided the cost would have been at least Rs. 60 (about £5). This was considered a good party, but nothing extraordinary or out of the way.

All the time the feasting is going on the service continues intermittently; but there are intervals when the lamas come outside the monastery for a rest and to relieve themselves. Early in the day they wander down into the wood below the monastery, but later on, as they have eaten and drunk more, they just go to the edge of the built-up wall at the end of the monastery compound and squat down with their backs to the people. During these intervals also they shave one another's heads. Also from time to time they put their heads under a running stream to take away the fumes of the *chi*.

The rest of the people also get somewhat mellowed, though usually not noticeably drunk; I have never seen an adult Lepcha lose control of his movements through drink, though one or two of the older people get somewhat fogged in their speech. The younger women move about more than the others carrying the big ladles of boiling water to replenish the *chi* and handing out the food; they

[2] It is always the custom when the last dish is served at a Lepcha feast to put on top a portion of raw meat or sausage for the guest to take home and eat at leisure.

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seem, however, to drink quite as much as the others, for as a mark of affection they will take a drink out of the *patyoot* of anybody they like or anybody who invites them. As the drinking continues voices get louder and gestures more vehement and there is a great deal of laughter; most of this laughter arises from obscene remarks which may be *double entente* or may consist merely of the Lepcha monosyllables (they are actually bi-syllables). Occasionally some rather crude and childish practical joke may be played; big leaves or some other incongruous object may be tied on to a man's pigtail while he is not looking, or the skirt of his coat hitched up behind, but these jokes are comparatively rare; the one thing which seems to the Lepchas continually and inexhaustibly funny is sex. There is a certain amount of rough sexual by-play; a young man, or occasionally a young woman, will make a gesture of grabbing at another young man's private parts; this is considered extremely funny. The bolder young men will also try to fondle the breasts of the younger married women but they are usually repulsed extremely roughly; on the whole Lepcha women have rougher and brusquer gestures than the men and it is not uncommon for a woman who is being teased to give her teaser a resounding smack on the face; this is always taken in good part. It is also quite common for a youth to hang on to the back of an older man he is fond of, putting his hands over the older man's shoulder and touching his breasts; with this gesture the youths resume the position of a child being carried on its father's back. I do not think there is any conscious homosexual intention in this behaviour; it is noticeable that it is always the younger man who clings to the back of the older and never the reverse. A somewhat parallel type of behaviour is for oldish boys round about the age of ten or twelve to put their arms round a seated older woman whom they are fond of and apply their face to her dress over the breasts; this is the type of behaviour which is abandoned 'when boys are old enough to learn shame'.

The poorer Lepcha feasts finish at nightfall; if all the provisions are finished then people go home to sleep. But the better feasts continue far into the night, and some go on into the subsequent day; a really good feast, such as the Boom Koor, lasts for three days and three nights. People doze intermittently, wherever they happen to be, but on the whole little sleep is had; under such conditions the Lepchas seem to manage with very little rest, and I have seen people after forty-eight hours almost continuous eating and drinking go off, apparently quite fresh, to work in the Fields.

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fields. When feasts go on into the night, and especially at marriage feasts, couples may go away into the forest or to a neighbouring shed; this depends entirely on individual wish and opportunity, and sexual activity is not a necessary or even a particularly common concomitant to a feast; on the other hand sexual conversation and jokes are inevitable and continuous, and in some of the longer feasts practical jokes with a sexual tinge are played: young women set on an old man, strip him naked and chase him round the monastery, and so on; it is nearly always the older men who are made the butts of such pleasantries.

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One of the things which most surprised me about the Lepchas was this constant verbal preoccupation with sex. Whenever a group of men and women were gathered together for any purpose, however solemn or important, every possible remark was given sexual significance. On the whole when there were only members of one sex present, except sometimes among the younger men, or when there were only three or four people present, the conversation was not so indecent, but in mixed groups it was practically continuously so, and each sally was greeted with as hearty laughter as if an entirely novel joke had been made. A certain amount of ingenuity was shown in giving apparently ordinary phrases a sexual meaning (almost any transitive verb could be twisted into a periphrasis for copulation) but apart from this the theme was not embroidered in any way; simply every possible opportunity was seized for mentioning the primary sexual characteristics and copulation.

It is difficult, especially with the English taboos on the anglo-saxon monosyllables, to give any illustrations of these jokes. But the following verbal transcription of an extremely solemn occasion may give some idea of the sort of pleasantries which are the constant accompaniment to Lepcha work and feasts. As has already been described[3] Chala Mandal went to a great deal of expense and trouble to summon from a distant village an old and widely-famed Mun in order to appease the spirit of his first dead wife, so that his lumbago might be cured and he might beget a son. This occasion was for the Mandal, for his two wives, and for the dozen or more other people present one of very great importance. This is the conversation which took place when the Mun was already in the position

[3] See Chapter Eight, p. 231.

windy days my favourite tree would bend and sway with incredible grace: it reminded me of some frail craft riding a stormy sea.

When we first arrived the hillsides were covered with yellow daphne, the bark of which is used to make paper. There were also a number of flowering apricots, orange trees, and ferns of every description, including the huge umbrella-like tree-fern, the pith of which can be made into spirit. Rather strangely, for Sikkim is famous for its flora, we found no flowers, but the undergrowth was thick with wormwood, which saturated the air with its pleasantly bitter scent.

According to the Lepcha dictionary the word Lingtem means "a mixture of slope and level: to be out of the perpendicular, to incline, to have leaning outwards." The place is all of these, except that the amount of level ground is negligible; and it was not possible to go more than a hundred yards or so in any direction without going either steeply up or down hill. The lowest and highest houses in the village were not more than a mile apart; but to go from one to the other involved a climb of well over fifteen hundred feet.

There were altogether thirty-three houses in Lingtem, and a total population of one hundred and seventy-nine souls. These thirty-three houses were spread about over several square miles of country, and in no particular spot were more than three or four grouped together. The grouping was entirely haphazard and in no way based upon relationships: a man might be at one end of the village, his brother a mile away. There was no attempt at planning; the village had just grown up like this. Additional houses would be built on any suitable site: the proximity of relations was of less importance than the selection of a spot that was free from evil influences. The monastery was situated in roughly the centre. In addition to its ordinary function as a place of worship, it served also as a village club. Twice every month there would be religious festivals, when anything up to

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eighty people, including men, women and children, would 527
be present. They would spend the day feasting and drinking, 796
and on some occasions would continue the party well into
the following day. There would generally be some visitors [574]
from nearby villages and, in consequence, much exchange
of gossip. These fortnightly meetings served the purpose of
a newspaper and helped to keep the people in touch. They [203]
were almost the only break in a life of otherwise unceasing
toil.

There are no shops in Lingtem, no doctor, and no school. 438
The people are mainly self-supporting and grow all their
own food. Such things as cotton, oil and salt are obtained
from Mangen which, in addition to a few Marwari shop- [205]
keepers, has also a post office to which mails are delivered
twice a week. This, however, is not much used, since the [212]
Lepchas are for the most part still illiterate. This means that
in order not to forget a thing they do not find it necessary
to commit it to writing. As a result, they have, like most [153]
primitive peoples, quite remarkable memories.

For the first few days we were left completely alone; not 609
a soul ventured near us. Early each morning Dhawa and
I would set off in our quest for people, but everywhere we
went there was nothing but empty houses, each with its [231]
guardian dog. I began to get worried, for it certainly looked
as though the Maharaja was right, although actually (but
I only learned this later) the people were merely away
working in their fields. And then one morning Geoffrey
discovered an ancient alone in a house. He was toothless, 123
decrepit, and ill, but willing to risk a visit. We decoyed him
up to the monastery, gave him some medicine and plied
him with cigarettes. As an informant he was useless; but
his visit served to break the ice. Others followed, and the
village soon realised that we really were harmless. There-
after we were able to arrange for a regular stream of
informants and someone or other usually came each morning
to talk. In this manner we soon came to know most of the
village by sight, and after the first few weeks were able to